**‘THE BOOK OF GRACE’**

Connellsville author pens second novel  
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**STORY COURTESY PAULA O’CONNELL**

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Connellsville author S.J. Cunningham displays her recent novels. Photo courtesy Paula O’Connell

A teenage girl is left alone in the middle of the woods, where she finds herself at the isolated cabin of a woman claiming to be her aunt.

“There has been some kind of accident, Grace thought suddenly. She didn’t know how she knew that, but she did. She didn’t want to think about anything because there was a part of her, way down deep, that knew everything had been her fault.”

So starts S.J. Cunningham’s suspenseful, newly published young adult fiction book, “ The Book of Grace.”

Connellsville resident and West Newton native, Cunningham, is no stranger to popular fiction writing.

“All This Was Mission,” her first novel, just published on Jan. 31, was named an International Book Award finalist. Equally successful, “The Book of Grace” is now trending number one in the Teen and Young Adult Philosophy category on [Amazon.com](http://amazon.com/).

Cunningham, who holds both a B.S. and an M.A. in creative writing from Seton Hill University, often finds herself writing about a protagonist who has to learn something about herself in order to move forward in her life.

“My characters are usually at some sort of crossroads in their lives and find their way forward through a connection with the spiritual,” explained Cunningham. “Grace is in this other world and doesn’t really know how she got there. The book flows back and forth between two realities for her. I wanted to make sure the book flowed smoothly for the reader, it wasn’t repetitive and that the reader understood what was happening.”

To help with that goal, Cunningham used two editors plus a couple of beta readers to check for flow and ease of comprehension.

The book’s plot, which travels between a world of reality and one of fantasy, developed organically for the author.

“I usually have a few character traits in mind when I start to write, but it always develops on its own as I write,” explained the author.

“Even if I have an idea, I don’t follow a strict plot line. I remember when I was writing this book, a character just kind of showed up, and I remember saying to myself, ‘Who’s this guy?’” said Cunningham, who believes spontaneity in the writing process is important.

Friends and family members have asked Cunningham if any of the characters are based on them.

“The answer is no,” replied Cunningham. “Although Grace is all fiction, there’s always a little part of me in every character. I don’t really draw from people I know. It doesn’t feel natural to write about people I’m close to.”

Cunningham enjoys writing young adult novels with a fantasy element because there’s just something magical about it.

“I just think there’s more out there than what we see in our own reality,” commented the author. “And if you open yourself up to it, you catch glimpses of it.”

The former crisis communications director for Columbia Gas now works as a communications consultant for her own firm, Four Score Strategies.

In addition to running her own company, Cunningham is the mother of three grown children she describes as productive adults. From her experiences as a mother, as well as memories of her own teen years, she can easily relate to her own novel themes of finding a deeper meaning in life while seeking our own individual paths.

Cunningham, who belonged to the first graduating class of the newly created Masters of Writing in Popular Fiction program at Seton Hill, credited one of the founders of that program, science fiction author and professor, Dr. Albert Wendland, as an inspiration.

“He was very passionate about literature, and he took a great interest in his students,” commented Cunningham.

Other early influences of Cunningham’s include her late paternal grandmother, Jane Lawson Cunningham, and her late father, Bob Cunningham. Both had been Westmoreland County public school teachers for over three decades.

“My grandmother really taught my sister and me that women could do anything they wanted in life,” reminisced Cunningham. “She was a big reader, and she instilled an early love of reading in me. She always had a large book shelf, and we could read anything we wanted from it. My dad was always my biggest cheerleader. Anything we wanted to do or try, he was right there supporting us. And he instilled a great love of learning in us.

“I remember when I was five I wrote little stories, then I wrote poetry as a teen. And I would just read everything on my grandmother’s bookshelves. When my parents discovered I was interested in reading, I started getting a lot of books for gifts.”

As for her future writing career, the author is not about to stop writing any time soon. Not one to rest on her laurels, she has just finished the draft for her apocalyptic book tentatively titled “ n the Land of Blood and Hope.” The book, which she describes as a futuristic, Hunger Gamestype novel, is set in Western Pennsylvania, with its ending in Connellsville’s Casparis Caves.

The first in a series, Cunningham revealed there will be a second book to follow. The author also has 30,000 words now written for her new, adult fiction love story. Remarking on the completion of her first two novels, Cunningham described feeling a sense of peace and completion when finishing each novel.

Her best advice to aspiring writers: “Just get the story out and get it down. Don’t worry about the editing process. You lose the magic of the creation process when you stop too often to edit along the way,” she added.

Not much chance of S.J. Cunningham stopping long enough along the way to lose her magic any time soon.

“The Book of Grace” is available on the Amazon and Barnes and Noble websites.

For more information and updates on the novels, go to [www.sjcunningham.net](http://www.sjcunningham.net/) or [www.Facebook.com/](http://www.facebook.com/) sjcunninghamwriter.

She can also be found on Instagram at [www.Instagram.com/sjcunninghamwriter.](http://www.instagram.com/sjcunninghamwriter.)