

Author

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A Novel Success Story

Vicki Bolam

Most of us know someone with an unpublished first novel sitting on the shelf. Stiff competition in the book biz makes publication notoriously difficult for first timers; and it's tough to become a second timer if no one will publish your work.

Unpublished novelists can take heart from the experience of Santa Cruz author Jeanne Schrager, who just wrote her first mystery novel and quickly sold it to St. Martin's Press. Schrager's book, *Fetish* (written under her maiden name, Jeanne Hart), is due out in August, and St. Martin's bought the manuscript within three weeks of receiving her query letter. Even though Schrager had confidence in her book, she was a little surprised. "The thing that amazed me was they made almost no changes." They did change her original title, which was *A Personal Possession*. St. Martin's also has an option on Schrager's second book, which she's already completed.

Most writers figure that once the book is sold, all they have to do is sit back and watch the money come in. Not so, says Schrager. Because St. Martin's (and most other publishers) don't do much promotion for first novels like this, Schrager finds

she has to toot her own horn. "You find yourself being a self promoter. It takes a lot of time. I don't know how anyone writes books if you have to be so busy promoting them."

The way Schrager does it is to maintain an extremely businesslike approach to her writing. She says she writes four to five hours each day and adds, "I'm also very well organized—my friends tease me about it."

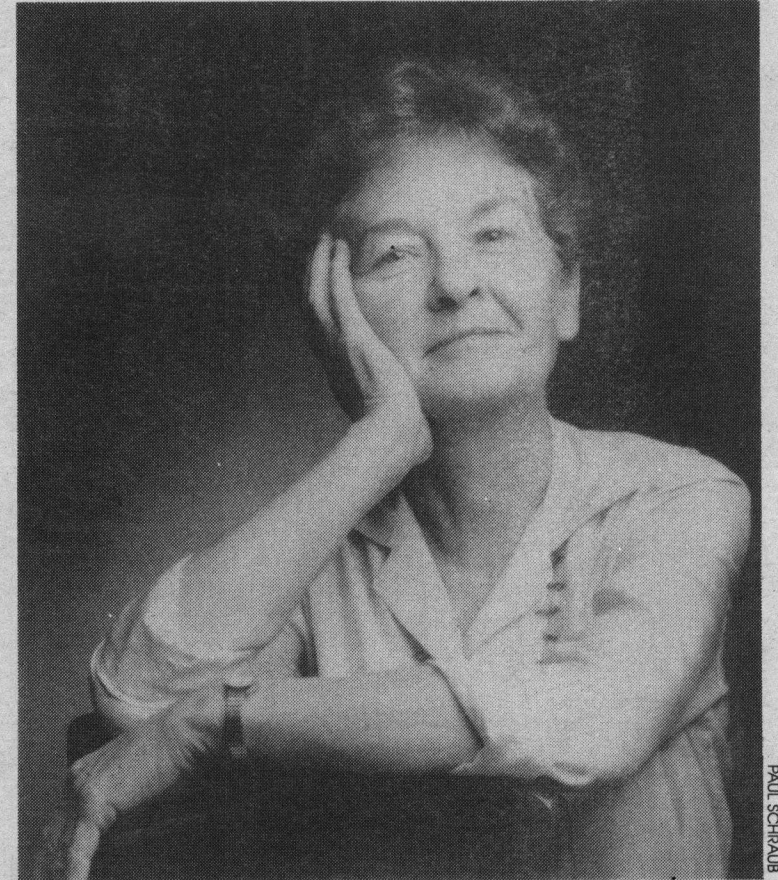
She has weekly meetings with a fellow writer to help keep herself on track. "We're good editors for each other because our strengths are just what the other person needs." She also gets technical advice from Lieutenant Jan Tepper, of the UCSC police force. "After I've finished a book I compile a list and go and meet with her. I'm also free to call her if I'm stuck on something. She's been extremely helpful and seems to enjoy it."

Of course it should also be mentioned that the main reason for Schrager's success is that her book is very good. Although she's modest about the accomplishment, she admits that putting together a successful mystery novel is tricky. "Plotting is the hardest part for me—the easiest is characterization and dialogue.

In a mystery you have to keep some things back, and it becomes kind of a complex problem for the writer. I don't plan too much in advance—all I had in mind when I started was the situation and the detective."

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In *Fetish* the situation involves three women who run a personals ad for a male companion. Her detective, Carl Pedersen, is part of the police force in Bay Cove, a town based on Santa Cruz. She decided to change the name and fictionalize the location, "because I wanted to be able to alter things. For example I reduced the population by quite a bit." Bay Cove still retains a Santa Cruz feel and many landmarks locals



PAUL SCHRAGER

Jeanne Schrager

will recognize.

Schrager plans to continue writing about Pedersen and Bay Cove; and for publicity reasons she isn't even too bothered by the inevitable

comparisons to another (fictional) mystery writer who lives in a seaside village on the opposite coast. Look for *Fetish* in August, with a booksigning planned at Plaza Books. •