

Fiction based on fact tells the story of a missing woman

By Debbi Christinck
Staff Writer

Combermere -- The true story of the 1995 disappearance of an Ottawa woman and the subsequent 10-week search for her by her friend has been turned into a story of fiction based on fact, which might never have been published except for Ottawa Valley connections.

"This is a local story in many ways because I found my publisher living 15 kilometres down the road after sending my manuscript to publishers all over the place for five years," Combermere author Brenda Missen said.

Her first book, *Tell Anna She's Safe*, is a mystery-thriller which tells the story of a woman who falls for a dangerous guy, and the friend who searches for her when she goes missing.

As a freelance writer and editor, Ms. Missen had long wanted to be a published author, but achieving this dream was proving challenging because she could not find a publisher.

"I took my manuscript to my book club and asked them to read it for me," she said. "Then Luciana (Ricciutelli) came back to the book club with an offer to publish the book."

The book was published by Inanna Publications, a small feminist press in Toronto, and has since been distributed widely, with Ms. Missen having the official launch at *Pilgrim Reader Books* in Combermere last Monday night.

"The launch was on my 50th birthday, so it was the best birthday present ever," she said. "I decided I wanted to be a writer when I was 10, so I hope this won't be my last book."

The story behind *Tell Anna She's Safe* begins over 16 years ago when Ms. Missen lived in Chelsea, Quebec, and became friends with Louise

Ellis, a fellow freelance writer who had become involved with, and was living with a man who had already served time in jail for manslaughter. Although Ms. Ellis did not tell her friend everything about the man who would eventually be convicted of murdering her, she did tell her he had been in jail.

"She thought he deserved a second chance," she said.

When Ms. Ellis went missing it was Ms. Missen who found her car and then continued to search for her for 10 weeks. Eventually, her body would be found and her partner charged with her death, based on circumstantial evidence.

"My book deals with those last days which no one really knows what happened," she said. "I did not want to make this totally fiction because the real story was so compelling."

Although the story of Ms. Ellis may be known to many, the author takes a different approach, trying to find out what happened between the main characters in the story. For some people this story might be pretty cut and dry, but for Ms. Missen there is a deeper lesson.

"There is a stereotype of the smart woman who gets involved with a man in prison," she said. "I wanted to show she was on an interior journey."

And the journey was not all bad, according to the author.

"There were good things which came out of this for her," she said. "She was on an intense journey of her own."

The intense journey was also one which Ms. Missen has been on, from when she found the car, to searching for her, to writing the book.

"When she went missing I felt like she almost charged me with telling the story," she added. "I felt this was

thrust on me."

There were also the questions which remained for her which she delves into with the book.

"I wanted to understand what was motivating her," she said.

Although the book is based on

And another woman's search for her

fact, Ms. Missen spent three years researching it and was given access to Mr. Ellis' journals by her sister for the research. A witness in the court case, she is also very closely acquainted with the facts of the case.

The title of the book, *Tell Anna She's*

Safe, is a very personal one which also inspires the reader to question what safety is, she said. The title derives from a dream Ms. Missen had when her friend went missing. In the dream an old school friend comes to tell her to "tell Mary she is safe." Ms.

Missen said she awoke and did not know who Mary was, only to learn later Mary was Louise's sister. This dream is used in the book as well, with the name Mary changed to the name Anna.

"I am trying to delve into different meanings of what safety is," she added.

The story is a complex one, both in the book and as Ms. Missen has processed what occurred to her friend, but she remains sympathetic to both the woman and her alleged attacker.

"We are so quick to judge 'he is a killer' and 'she is a victim'," she said. "I think everyone is on a journey they need to be on."

"The journey may not look good from the outside," she said. "It may not look good from the inside, but even in negative relationships we can learn something."

This whole process has also been a learning experience for the author, she added.

"I learned a lot about myself when I was searching for her," she said.

Since the release, the response to the book has been very positive, Ms. Missen said.

"I'm getting emails from people telling me they can't put it down, so it is a fast read," she said.

Living on the Madawaska River, Ms. Missen enjoys working outside on her writing on her dock and in the beauty which surrounds her. She is also busy working on a new novel and a spiritual memoir.

"My first drafts I write by hand, so I like to work outside," she added.

Locally available at *Pilgrim Reader Books* in Combermere and Charlie Ds in Barry's Bay, the book is also available at national chain book stores, as well as directly through her website at www.brendamissen.com



Brenda Missen released her book, *Tell Anna She's Safe*, last week at Pilgrim Reader Books. It is a true story of the disappearance of an Ottawa woman and the subsequent 10-week search by Ms. Missen to find her.