

Arts & Entertainment

She traded analyst's couch for word processor

By Al Pope
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Harper Street Publishing photo

BERTON RETREAT •.. Author Julie Brickman has just begun her stay at Dawson City's Berton House.

Canada Council grant to work on her first novel.

"That was a big step for me. Not so much the money, although that was important too because it allowed me to cut back on my practice, but it was the vindication that meant most to me. It meant somebody believed in my writing."

The novel, *What Birds Can Only Whisper*, was completed during this winding-down period, and had been submitted to publishers before she closed up the psychology shop.

And then, on Monday, her first day as a full-time writer, Turnstone Press called to accept the book.

"Not that I haven't had many a bad night since," she smiles, "but that was a great day."

As a psychologist, Brickman specialized in women's issues, particularly rape and incest.

What Birds Can Only Whisper is the story of Kendra Quilman, a woman who, although involved in a loving and passionate relationship, suffers total memory blackout whenever she has sex.

The author makes no attempt to spin the mystery out till the end of the book; we soon know that Kendra suffers from multiple split personalities, caused by severe childhood sexual abuse.

The book follows her mental breakdown, and her painful, sometimes brutal, journey back to sanity.

"I had long written and spoken about memory and incest," she says, "but the venues were no longer adequate for the vision I had accumulated over

years of work as a psychologist.

"High-pitched little voices with complete childhood memory would pop out of patients, who had been unforthcoming, even defensive.

"I tried to write about *this* as a clinician, but it wasn't enough. Only fiction offered the scope I needed,"

It was upon quitting the psychology practice that Brickman decided to move to San Diego, California.

"Once I didn't have a practice, I realized I could live where I wanted, and I thought it would be nice to be warm for a while."

So then how on earth did she end up in Dawson City?

"I had wanted to come for a while. I'd heard about the beauty, the isolation, but I was discouraged by the cost.

"And then (a friend) told me about the Berton House, and it seemed like the perfect opportunity."

"I wanted one of the characters in the novel I'm working on to be from the Yukon.

"I didn't really think that I would get (the Berton House placement), but I knew I wanted it. I really went at that application."

This last statement causes no surprise; it doesn't take long to form an impression of Brickman as someone who "really goes after" the things which capture her interest.

The Berton House is the childhood home of author Pierre Berton.

He purchased it and had it renovated to provide "a room of one's own" for Canadian

writers engaged on a major work.

Brickman is just two weeks into a three-month stay in the clean, well-lighted little place, when I drop by to interview her for this story.

She sits in the sole armchair, next to the Berton House library, a bookcase stocked mainly with Berton's own works; I relax on the couch, notebook on knee, Chilkoot Amber on hand.

Already, *this* southern transplant shows a talent for Yukon hospitality.

Montreal born, raised in New Jersey, educated in Winnipeg and recently a resident of Toronto and then San Diego, Brickman was shocked when she got her first look at Dawson and realized how small the community really is.

"I can't believe I'm going to live here," was her first reaction.

Two weeks later, she is "head over heels in love with the place.

"I've met more people in the two weeks I've been here than in the two years I've lived in San Diego.

"And I think it's the people who are really knocking me out. It's not just that I'm amazed at the lifestyles; it's that there seem to be more multi-talented, interesting, energetic people here than I've ever seen in one place."

The life-long urbanite, whose previous wilderness experience has all been in "cottage country," has just taken a dog-sled trip to the Stewart River home of musher Kyla Boivin.

"It was fascinating, wonderful," she says. "I have a kind of instinctive respect for people here that I didn't feel in California. It's something about their independence, their self-reliance - especially in the bush."

While living in the Berton House, Brickman is working on her second novel, *The Empty Quarter*, set in the United Arab Emirates, an Arabian Gulf country where she once lived.

The Empty Quarter, or Rub al Khali, is the blistering 'desert of deserts,' where even Bedouin raiders once feared to travel.

And the future?

"I've always loved crime fiction: especially Ross McDonald, that intricate interweaving of family tales. I'd like to write a crime novel someday."