

celebrating all good things

Novel approach

Writer Chris Orcutt is pleasantly surprised by his success on the road less traveled. *by Kate Goldsmith*

Local author Chris Orcutt has honed his craft for two decades. He started his career as a reporter at The Millbrook Round Table, a job he calls “his first love.” Orcutt’s short fiction has appeared in literary journals, and as a playwright he’s had some of his works performed. His resume includes such day jobs as speechwriting, technical writing, teaching and editing.

His other talents notwithstanding, Orcutt’s novels are garnering attention these days. Last year, he published the first book in his Dakota Stevens detective series, “A Real Piece of Work.” Recently, the second title, “The Rich Are Different,” was released. Both are e-books available on Amazon’s Kindle platform.

Electronic publishing was not the way Orcutt initially planned to go. He came up through a time when print was king, and he still loves and has faith in the printed word.

“These novels went through the traditional process and they were turned down,” he said. “But I always knew if I could get these books to readers, readers would enjoy them.”

To date, “A Real Piece of Work” has sold close to 6,000 copies and achieved a No. 1 top rating in Amazon Literary Fiction (Kindle) and No. 4 in Mystery.

“I was very surprised that the book has sold thousands of copies, and it’s sold more than your typical first run of a hardcover novel [from a new author],” he said. “That’s what I like about Kindle ... it allows me to reach an audience directly.”

The series fea-

tures the exploits of private detective Dakota Stevens and his ultra-capable assistant, the brilliant and beautiful Svetlana Krush. Dakota maintains a practice in New York City but retreats to his Millbrook home for rest and reflection, so there are many local references for Hudson Valley readers.

In “A Real Piece of Work,” Dakota and Svetlana uncover an international art forgery ring in the Catskills and enter a dangerous world where the ‘real pieces of work’ are not only the paintings being copied but also some of the characters themselves. The duo solves the case, albeit at great personal cost to Dakota.

“[It’s] a Pyrrhic victory, where you won but you didn’t win, because the playing field is just scorched,” said Orcutt. “He questions why he’s doing this. He’s lost his detecting mojo, been doing nothing but watching ‘The Rockford Files’ for the last few months. That’s where ‘The Rich are Different’ picks up.”

Svetlana, a Ukrainian-American chess grandmaster, moves strategically to bring Dakota back into the world: she makes him take a case.

“They’re summoned to the Long Island estate of this eccentric heiress, because her brother was found dead on a Montana resort,” said Orcutt.

The resort is a ranch set up like an Old West town, where the very wealthy pay to step back in time. Dakota and Svetlana must travel to Montana and find the killer.

“It’s a complex case,” said Orcutt. “The main story is finding the killer of this eccentric brother who runs this Old West resort; but the ‘B’ story is the detective, Dakota, getting his mojo back, because he’s deeply depressed, he’s just off his game because of what happened [in the previous case]; he’s slowly getting that back.”

Orcutt wrote “The Rich Are Different”

as an homage to “The Great Gatsby” by F. Scott Fitzgerald and to the Western genre, giving “tips of the hat” to Clint Eastwood, “High Noon” and other favorites.

“It’s an East meets West novel,” he said.

The idea for the Old West resort was inspired by Orcutt’s trip to Montana about eight years ago.

“A number of things just sparked my imagination,” he said. “There are quite a lot of ghost towns in Montana; they’re perfectly preserved towns from the 1800s. Mining dried up and people just moved out. I started thinking: What is somebody wealthy created an Old West resort, where people could go and play cowboy for one or two weeks?”

Yellowstone National Park also made an impact on Orcutt.

“I was strongly influenced by the sense of place out there and wanted to convey some of that. Yellowstone is just remarkable; it really is a national treasure,” he said.

Although Dakota Stevens is a private detective, Orcutt said his goal has been to write novels about a detective rather than writing a detective novel.

“There are plenty of detective novels, all kinds of formulaic approaches. Detective novels are entirely driven by plot,” he said. “I wanted to write a character-driven novel about a detective and his world. The detective is more at the forefront. I feel I’ve accomplished that.”

He added. “I’m not unique in this; the author Raymond Chandler, he was always after the same thing with his Marlowe character.”

Judging by the number of five-star reviews “A Real Piece of Work” has



Millbrook author Chris Orcutt has just released ‘The Rich Are Different,’ the second novel in the Dakota Stevens detective series. *Courtesy photo*

received on Amazon, Orcutt’s assessment isn’t merely boastful. Along with the surprise of success came a sense of vindication after going through the gauntlet of print publishing, where he was told that the market for the detective genre was too glutted, or the timing wasn’t right. A movie production company that expressed interest in the story ultimately rejected it because “it needed more explosions.”

“With all due respect [industry professionals] can be right 90 percent of the time, but then they’re wrong 10 percent of the

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Rhinebeck chamber music series opens Oct. 14



The Rhinebeck Chamber Music Society recently announced its 2012-2013 season. Concerts are held Sunday afternoons at 3 p.m. at The Church of the Messiah, 6436 Montgomery St. (Route 9) in Rhinebeck.

The 2012-13 season begins on Oct. 14 with the Linden Quartet, followed by the Pacifica Quartet on Nov. 11. The Aulos Ensemble per-

forms on Dec. 9. Shows in the New Year include Kerry Henderson (baritone) and Babette Hierholzer (piano) on Jan. 6, 2013; and the Horszowski Trio on April 21, 2013.

Tickets for each concert are \$25 per adult, \$5 per student under 23 with valid ID, and free for children under 13. Subscribe to all five concerts for \$100. For more information about each program and tickets, visit www.rhinebeckmusic.org or call (845) 876-2870.



The 2012-2013 Rhinebeck Chamber Music Society season includes (from top left) Aulos Ensemble (photo by Jill LeVine), Horszowski Trio (photo by Lisa-Marie Mazzucco), Linden String Quartet (photo www.lindenquartet.com) and Pacifica Quartet (photo by Anthony Parmelee).



Super hero

'Dark Knight' is 'awesome'

Batman, a.k.a. the Caped Crusader and the Dark Knight, is a comic book hero created in 1939 by Bob Kane and Bill Finger. In reality, he is millionaire (later, billionaire) playboy and philanthropist Bruce Wayne, who, having witnessed his parents' murder when he was a boy, swore to avenge their deaths by fighting crime wherever and whenever he found it.

First appearing on the Big Screen in 1949 (Robert Lowery played Batman) and again in 1966 (Adam West played The Caped Crusader), this superhero became entrenched in American culture, and I would venture a guess that he's here to stay! In 1989 and 1992, Michael Keaton assumed the role; in 1995 Val Kilmer donned the cape; and in 1997 George Clooney roared from the Bat Cave in his Bat Mobile and took on the bad guys.

The bad guys? They are the likes of the Joker (you may remember the brilliant performance of Heath Ledger; if not, check it out on YouTube), the Penguin, Two-Face and the Riddler.

The Chris Nolan Trilogy, "Batman Begins" (2005) "The Dark Knight" (2008) and, finally, "The Dark Knight Rises" (2012), takes the Batman series in a new, more realistic direction. It stars Christian Bale, renowned British actor and star of "American Psycho" (2000), "Reign of

Fire" (2002), "The Machinist" (2004) and "The Fighter" (2010). Though arguable, he is the best Batman.

Why? These three episodes concentrated, more, on the man behind the mask, Bruce Wayne, and Mr. Bale surely gives him depth. "The Dark Knight Rises" finds Bruce in the doldrums, anguishing over a lost love, Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal), getting older (he's graying at the temples), walking with a cane, generally feeling sorry for himself and living the life of a recluse. He has not appeared in public, and his Batman suit has hung in the Bat Cave, unused, for almost eight years.

Will you feel sorry for Bruce? I did!

In comes the villain, a domestic terrorist named Bane (Tom Hardy, a Brit as well, was excellent, and he has starred in "Warrior," "Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy," "The Take," and "Wuthering Heights."). His head is shaved, he has a Darth Vader voice and he wears a Hannibal Lecter mask. His apocalyptic plan, an atomic Armageddon, may seem similar in motivation to the ongoing uprisings around the world. He plans to take over and destroy Gotham City.

Will the Dark Knight overcome his debilitating and paralyzing self-pity?

Yes, but in their initial encounter, Bane, having superior strength, beats Bruce into



The villain Bane (Tom Hardy) vs. Batman (Christian Bale)

the ground, literally. It's hard to watch a superhero being brutalized. When Bane rips the mask off Bruce and says, "You have my permission to die," you'll think all is lost!

Bruce is imprisoned, and it seems that escape is impossible. Will he rise from the darkness? I'd best say no more!

The co-stars all give wonderful performances: Anne Hathaway as the Cat Woman, Gary Oldman as Commissioner Gordon, Joseph Gordon-Levitt as the hot-headed Detective Blake, Morgan Freeman as Fox, Marion Cotillard as Miranda, and Michael

Caine as Alfred.

Alfred, Bruce's friend and his butler, wants Bruce to get a life. He'd like it if Bruce would never put on the Batman's suit again; in a tear-jerking scene, he tells Bruce, "You are as special to me as you were to your mother and father. I swore to protect you, and I haven't!"

What he decides to do will sadden you.

This film is three hours long, it cost \$250 million, and it's awesome! It was written by David Goyer and Jonathan Nolan and directed by Chris Nolan.

Chris Orcutt

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time," said Orcutt. "There are a lot of great books out there that somehow navigate the process, but what if they hadn't navigated the process?"

Although he's happy with his e-book sales (and his 70 percent royalty), Orcutt would still like to get a traditional print deal for his novels.

"Most people still read traditional books. I'm not going to kid you; I would love to see my books reach a traditional audience," he said. "At the same time, it's been marvelous to make a connection with readers this way."

The Internet has led to major changes in publishing, demanding adjustments by all parties: writers, agents, editors and publishers.

"I grew up with this traditional book model, and that was the goal. I'm seeing now that the paradigm has completely shifted," said Orcutt. "All authors today are confronted to some extent with this feeling of 'What's going on?' Publishing is changing and it's changing overnight."

The new model requires Orcutt to wear more hats, when he'd rather keep his 'writer hat' snug on his head.

"There's a part of me, and I think a lot of other writers feel this way, [that says] I'm a writer and want to focus on writing," he said. "All this publishing stuff, I don't want to do it, doing promotion and making sure that the book you're offering people is quality and making sure it's formatted correctly."

Apparently, Dakota and Svetlana are proving that quality can pay off: proceeds from "A Real Piece of Work" will send Orcutt and his wife, Alexas, on a long-overdue honeymoon next month.

"This is going to be the first real vacation and the first real honeymoon since we were married 16 years ago," said Orcutt. "When we were first married we didn't have the resources or the ability to take a real honeymoon. So the proceeds from that book are financing a very extensive two-week vacation in France, primarily Paris."

Orcutt isn't a regular reader of the detective or mystery genre. Perhaps that accounts for the wide audience that has embraced his series.

"I want the reader to have an aesthetic experience with the language. I want it to be seamless, I want there to be some elegance and I want people to feel richer hav-

ing read it," said Orcutt. "To say, yeah, maybe it was a mystery novel but there were still these terrific moments of dialog and description. It's been important from the beginning to have the writing as good as it could be."

Hopefully, the future will hold more adventures for Dakota and Svetlana. Orcutt also aspires to make inroads as a short story writer.

"As much as I love Dakota and Svetlana, they are just the tip of the iceberg as far as what I can do," he said. "If I had one story published in The New Yorker, I could die a happy man. It's a very tall order."

Orcutt said he's been encouraged by the personalized rejections he's received from the likes of Harper's, The New Yorker and The Atlantic, which suggest he's "getting there."

"I just love the short story. There is just something profound about being able to give readers a full experience in 5,000-7,000 words or less," he said. "I love the challenge, so that's really where my heart is with my writing when I'm not writing about Dakota and Svetlana."

Visit www.chrisorcutt.com for more information.

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