

Releasing second novel during the pandemic has been strange for Caledon author

By Rob Paul

When Suzanne Hillier retired from being one of the most prominent divorce lawyers in Ontario—known in Brampton as “the Barracuda”—she decided to dive back into her true passion: writing.

Now 89-years-old, the Caledon resident has had two books published in the last few years with more on the way.

Her most recent novel, *My Best Friend Was Angela Bennett*, came out on June 6. It's a story that revolves around love, friendship, and survival set in Newfoundland during World War II and has been praised as a harrowing journey, engaging, and unforgettable while looking at how friendships endure through the most difficult of times.

From Newfoundland herself, and the daughter of the former Attorney General of the province, she used her early experiences as inspiration for the novel. Only resuming writing 12 years ago, after finding her love for it nearly 70 years ago, she strives to write in a pro-feminist style and incorporate parts of her own life into her work.

The pro-feminist style of her writing has been influenced by her firsthand experience as a single-mother who decided to become a lawyer in her late 30s and was just one of five women in a graduating class of 150 people at the University of Toronto. Later in life, a cancer diagnosis changed everything for her.

“I was a practicing lawyer for 32 years and I never loved practicing law, that just wasn't me,” she said. “I was a people person and I always loved my clients. I had strong relationships with my clients, and they're the ones that made me appreciate it because when you're getting a divorce you really want someone to love you and be supportive. I found that I always wanted to write, but my husband died at 44 and I had three teenagers and I was teaching high school and we needed money. I thought I would do better financially in law, and it was more of a practical decision, but I did it because I really like people and enjoy helping them. After 32 years of burning myself out, I got a Leukemia and that's when I started to write.”

Releasing her second novel during the pandemic wasn't easy and it's been a strange experience for Hillier as someone who loves to get out there and mingle with readers and talk about her book in person.

“It's a hell of a time to bring out a book because I love to mix with people and I've got all my old divorcees—I've divorced half of Brampton—and when I'm down there they all come around and they all want to see how I am and talk about the book,” she said. “I'm very fond of my old clients and they all keep in touch with me, so it makes promoting a book great fun, but I haven't been able to do anything with the pandemic. It's impossible to really be out there promoting a book right now. You can't do it in-person and I just don't like to do it over Zoom because it's not personal enough. I did have a discussion over Zoom with the Orangeville Library that was pretty fun, but everything is just very awkward. They aren't having signings right now at places like Chapters and even a terrific store like BookLore (in Orangeville) isn't able to have people come in like that right now because it's just too scary right now.”

The experience has been far less enjoyable for her with the human interaction aspect of the book release removed, but she understands why it can't happen with the danger of COVID-19.

“There's no fun with releasing a book when you can't go out and meet with people and connect with them,” said Hillier. “I've got the kind of book that's a real kind of women's book with an edge that some people love and it's an easy book to promote—all you have to do is sit there and wave it around and say it's a bit of a dirty book. Getting out there and meeting with people always attracts them to buy your book but you really just can't be doing that right now. Everyone is being cautious right now and we don't want to be drawing too many people to one place.”

Though things are different with her second novel release, the response has been positive, but there have been issues with the

availability of the book online due to the impact the pandemic has had on the supply chain.

'I've gotten a lot of five-star reviews, and I know they've ordered more at BookLore,' she said. 'It wasn't for sale in the U.S. for the longest time and didn't have it at Amazon because they said due to COVID they were having distribution problems. So, it didn't go smoothly at times due to that, a lot of people tried to get it and couldn't so there were some annoying problems. It wasn't an easy process like my previously published book that bashed hockey (Sonja and Carl) where it was all over the place? imagine writing your first book and focusing on the negative side of Canada's favourite! So, the two books I've had published bash the sport of Canada and the other is one I'd never want my grandchildren to read! That's why my latest book is perfect.'

With a handful of unpublished novels, she hopes to get out in the coming years, her most recent book is the one she is most excited about getting published and out to the public.

'It's called Real Connections and I don't have a publisher for it yet, but it's the best thing I've done and at least I'm not bashing hockey or torturing someone sexually,' she said. 'It's more of a childhood trauma with an interesting custody battle. It's not a bad book and I'm almost proud of it. Sometimes you write something and think, 'Jesus, why would I write that?' But this is something I'm looking forward to. I worked on it for about six months and now it's done. I've got four or five more books I've written that I want to get out and published because they're just sitting around and looking at me.'