

Kintnersville author triumphs over ALS

"Page-turner" novels emanate from Kintnersville

Mary Shafer

According to a recent survey, most Americans feel they have a book in them, and many believe that someday, they will actually write it.

It's a quaint notion, but for Kintnersville attorney Richard Smolev, that belief was more than a theoretical concept. He didn't have the time to wait for "someday." He didn't even have time to wait for retirement.



Author Richard Smolev in the stone writing studio of his early 1800s farm in Kintnersville.

Smolev, 64, learned a few years ago that he was stricken with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). Often referred to as "Lou Gehrig's Disease," ALS is a progressive neurodegenerative disease affecting nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord. The ongoing breakdown of motor neurons robs the brain of its ability to control muscle movement, leading to paralysis and eventually, death. There is no known cure.

So, when Smolev discovered that he had the dread disease, he fought back the only way he could: He disallowed it to rob him of his dream of authorship. "I always knew that I wanted to write a novel," he recalls. "It was part of my DNA."

He began working from home, and in his free time, immersed himself in learning the craft of written storytelling. He'd already been writing for 14 years, but as a busy professional with a daily Bucks County-to-New York commute, he hadn't much time to get serious about it.

He already understood the bones of the skill, having begun a novel about a painting stolen by one of the "monument men," officers tasked by the Allies with cataloging and returning art looted by the Nazis at the end of World War II.

But now he needed to learn the finer points of the writer's craft, in ratcheting up the tension to the level of engaging fiction. And he had to learn it quickly, because ALS doesn't wait for anyone to complete plans before beginning its

dastardly work.

The diligence with which Smolev applied himself to this task is evident in the result – his first novel, “Offerings.” The 272-page hardcover, published last fall by Academy Chicago, is a page-turner from the word “go.” It follows the spectacular rise and imminent fall of Kate Brewster, a corporate investment attorney on the fast track to having it all, when she gets deeply involved in the looted art case that threatens to bring her down.

The premise, merely interesting at first, soon captures the reader. Smolev’s ability to get inside the head of a mid-career working mother and to make readers care deeply about her is testament to his skill as an author. Impeccable research lends authority to the story, fast-paced action keeps it moving, and crackling dialogue makes it sing. If Amazon.com reviews are any indicator, Smolev has succeeded wildly in his quest as a novelist.

Not content to rest on that victory, he now awaits his second novel, “In Praise of Angels,” due out at the end of this month. This time, Smolev plumbs the depths of the social and political chaos of America’s post-Civil War years, whose turmoil ironically reflects much of what our country is dealing with today.

This newest book was written as he finished up his legal career and promoted “Offerings,” despite the advancing disease. Like his courageous and stalwart protagonists, Smolev doesn’t allow the obstacles to win. He concentrates instead on indulging his interest in history, while giving his readers something substantial to sink their literary teeth into.

Having already outlasted his original prognosis, Smolev continues to approach life with typical dry wit and a sustaining sense of humor. “Given my illness and probable limited time remaining,” he reports, “I’m now writing short stories.”

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