

## A dream, hard work and a book contract

By **PATRICIA DUFF**

The blank white page can be terrifying to a writer.

But the sometimes nightmarish task of getting words down into story form can turn into the dream of publication when you least expect it.

And that's exactly what happened to Ann Gonzalez.

Gonzalez is a Seattle resident and a member of the first graduating class of the Whidbey Writers Workshop Master of Fine Arts program.

During the program's intensive residency on Whidbey Island last January, Gonzalez had the opportunity to read the first chapter of her young adult novel to an audience of students, faculty and visiting authors and agents.

The novel captured the attention of Regina Brooks, a New York city literary agent and by April, Gonzalez had signed a book contract.

On July 12 she received a publishing contract from WestSide Books for "Shh, Shh, Shh," the story of a 14-year-old girl with a schizophrenic mother.

Gonzalez, who didn't start writing until she was 40, said she couldn't have done it without the MFA program's guidance.

"My book would not have been written well enough to secure an agent and most definitely would not have been revised well enough to land a book contract, were it not for the willingness of the innovators in the Whidbey Island Writers Association to create the best writers' workshop in the west," Gonzalez said.

Gonzalez said she wrote the book during NANOWRIMO, National Novel Writing Month, a seat-of-your-pants approach to novel writing.

Gonzalez' teacher, Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen, had written and sold a novel the year before with NANOWRIMO and wanted to try it again. She invited Gonzalez and five other writers



Photo courtesy of Ann Gonzalez

**Ann Gonzalez is a member of the first graduating class of the Whidbey Writers Workshop MFA program. Her first novel, "Shh, Shh, Shh," will be published by WestSide books.**

from the workshop to take the challenge with her. Participants started writing Nov. 1. The goal was to write a 175-page or 50,000-word novel by midnight, Nov. 30.

Gonzalez didn't complete a manuscript in that time period but decided to use the start of the novel as her senior thesis.

It was a good choice.

Gonzalez' story centers around a strong and courageous teenager named Andrea who is trying to deal with a schizophrenic mother. With the help of her father, her best friend and a psychotherapist, Andrea is able to face the pain of the reality that her mother may be lost to a mental illness forever.

"If one or two teenagers read my book and thought that getting into therapy might be 'cool', I would be very happy," said Gonzalez.

Gonzalez said that "Shh, Shh, Shh" is a work of fiction but that her own mother did suffer from schizophrenia.

"I know how difficult it can be to be raised by a mentally ill parent," she said. I hope people don't read my book and think I've been unfair to the mentally ill. Schizophrenia is a horrible illness and, unfortunately, it can be unrelentingly cruel to the sufferer and to those in proximity."

It is apparent from just reading the first few chapters of "Shh, Shh, Shh," that Gonzalez is a writer who is able to connect to the emotional life of a young person with no hint of condescension or sentimentality.

She presents Andrea immediately as a person who suffers all the pain and underlying confusion of having to understand the adult issues of mental illness, while watching her mother rapidly fail from her young daughter's point of view.

Gonzalez wisely uses a first-person narrator with Andrea's clear voice ringing true right from the start.

"Hey, are you okay?" Margie asks. She sits up and puts her hand on my shoulder. She brushes back the hair hanging over my face. I press my head between my knees; I'm rocking and embracing my legs with both arms. I am as tight and as small as I can be.

I want to let go, to answer her, but I can't. Something is happening to me, I feel sick to my stomach. I can't speak. I just rock and rock and rock.

I'm going to get your dad. Margie grabs Pedro and puts him at my feet. I'll be right back. Margie has been running to get help for me ever since Mom's first breakdown. In a few seconds she returns with Dad. Even in this state, I can see him without looking at him, his face is pale, ghostly."

One often hears authors who write for children and young adults say how there is a general impression among non-writers that creating literature for the young must be easier than writing for adults. Nothing can be further from the truth.

It is no easy task to convey the happiness, pain, tortured-life, sadness, elation, coolness, eagerness, dorkiness, embarrassment, astuteness or any of the other hundred or so qualities

that any one teenager can possess in the course of a single day. Gonzalez seems to have found that trick; that ability to create a young character that readers can relate to simply because she allows the reader to see each moment of Andrea's emotional life with unfettered actions and a clear voice.

Gonzalez' vision for the book goes beyond one that just tells a good story. Her intent is to reach teenagers who may feel unconnected.

"My intent was to portray an experience where a teenager needs help and can't get it from the routine sources," she said. Too often, young people feel that if they can't talk to their parents then they can't talk to anyone."

Gonzalez' book contract is a success story and one that seems almost too good to be true. But, although it looks as if Gonzalez was lucky to have Brooks be in the right place at the right time for her, writing is a craft that takes an inordinate amount of hard work and attention to detail.

Another MFA student, Helen Sears, summed it up succinctly in a student blog: "Writing is akin to watching your own appendectomy. It's agonizing, physically and emotionally excruciating, but fascinating beyond any previous dream."

In the intense two-year process, a dozen toolboxes of writing techniques are acquired; but more than that, a student learns lessons he or she might have gone a lifetime without discovering.

Gonzalez is clear about the significance of the writers workshop and its influence on her work.

"I'm full of gratitude for those who dream and those who say yes to those dreams and to those who write and are willing to teach others to write."

Just around the time her book goes to print, Gonzalez will walk down the graduation isle in August to receive her masters of fine arts. It will be a banner day for her, as well as for the young program that was started by the Whidbey Island Writers Association only two years ago.

It is the only program of its kind in the country to be offered not by a college or university but by an organization of writers.

If you think you're a writer, check it out and see if you have what it takes to get your own book contract.

Visit [www.writeonwhidbey.org](http://www.writeonwhidbey.org) for information.

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