

BY SANDRA HUME

SWEET DREAMS ARE MADE OF THIS

One woman's writing aspirations take a surprising turn.

Is blow job one word or two?

I pause over the manuscript in front of me. My *Chicago Manual of Style* won't cut it for this question, so I turn to my experts online. If anyone can steer me straight, it's the romance novelists.

I'm still surprised to have them as a resource. Like a lot of writers, my future calling was never a mystery. Early on, my plan was simple: to be Judy Blume. I knew Judy's heroines better than I knew myself. I felt Margaret's tug-of-war with religion and her angst over her changing body, sympathized with Deenie's scoliosis diagnosis and wanted Sheila to just admit to her fears already. I ached for Karen's parents' divorce and cried over Davey's dad's death. Blume was all about Serious Issues, and when I grew up I'd write about girls just like that, with Serious Issues of their own.

Cut to college graduation. Journalism degree in hand, recession in full swing, I had my own Serious Issues to face: the financial variety. I embarked on a series of editorial jobs, each a small step up from the last. When I finally scored health insurance, I held onto it with both hands. After my final full-time job imploded in the dot-com crash of the early aughts, I switched gears and began freelancing for magazines until that industry, too, collapsed.

I became less picky about work. By then I was married with three kids, so I fine-tuned the art of sandwiching projects between chauffeuring. Whenever acquaintances asked the inevitable *What do you write?*—they always want to know if they've read anything of mine—my answer was as cryptic as it was true: whatever people pay me for. Editing proved more lucrative, so I leaned toward those jobs. Over the years I invoiced for endless blog posts, newsletters, online personal ads, magazine articles, books, website content, white papers, and other projects that defied categorization.

What I didn't do was write fiction. Closer to forty than thirty, I let myself feel the dejection about this loss until I reminded myself: Duh. I still could. Rather than crafting manuscripts from research and interviews, I started to make things up. But as I experimented with the craft of storytelling, I found my inspiration wasn't rooted where I expected, in the coming-of-age characters in Judy Blume's books. Instead, I saw Laurie Adams.

Long brown hair caught to the side in a barrette, cradling a guitar in her lap, Laurie was the heroine of *Laurie's Song*, #3 in the Sweet Dreams young-adult romance series launched in 1981. Sweet Dreams readers didn't have to wonder what the main characters looked like—they were right there in full color on the books' covers. Like Laurie, who fell for slacker-musician Skip before finding the quieter, more studious Jeff. Or debater Shelby with the pixie cut and the blazer (famously

depicted by a "Dancing in the Dark"—era Courteney Cox), who competed against her crush at debate camp in *The Last Word*. Or Kathy, the wannabe veterinarian in silver-clasped braids and holding a cat on the cover of *Trusting Hearts*, who hoped to snag hunting fan Dean without compromising her animal-loving principles. Or Jill of *Ten-Boy Summer*, whose dating wager with her feisty best friend, Toni, proved so popular the two girls reappeared in their own mini-series.

Sweet Dreams churned out more than 230 titles between 1981 and 1996—and spun off the infamous Sweet Valley High series, which was Sweet Dreams crossed with Melrose Place. Through the late 80s, these lovesick girls were my people. In the end they always got the guy—if not the one they wanted, the one they were best suited to. Anti-feminist and unempowering? Pretty much. To a 1980s teenager with a tumultuous home life and no boyfriend to speak of, their very predictability was their appeal.

So maybe I shouldn't have been surprised that when I finally began to write fiction, I did not tackle Serious Issues. Instead I found myself penning meet-cutes or describing that unforgettable first kiss. As I wrote (and rewrote) I sought comrades to turn to for advice and inspiration. I was particularly impressed with a group of romance writers on Facebook, smart and savvy and oozing with the storytelling talent I lacked. Word got around about my editing, so I started editing their books, too. And I loved it. My head might have wanted Serious Issues, but my heart, it seemed, was full of sweet dreams.

By now, I almost exclusively edit romance novels. It's harder than it sounds. Sex scenes, for example, are extra tricky. *Wait*, I'll mutter to myself, trying to determine whether to query the writer on missing

body parts. Where *is his other hand?* Or clothing: *Didn't she already take off her leggings? Why are we mentioning jeans?*

Or spelling: *Is blow job one word or two?*

My tribe comes back with an answer: consensus is mixed. I decide on two, and move on to the next scene. Line by line, chapter by chapter, through to the inevitable, innocent, happily-ever-after I've loved since I was 10.

Sandra Hume's two novels under her pen name, Sienna Cash, take place in the two places she loves best: Boston and Fort Collins.



BY COREY RADMAN

BAD DOG (OWNER)

*Puppies always seem like the best idea.
Until they aren't.*

Writers are alone a lot. For me, that's by design and preference. I love that I can type and mutter to myself all day without being judged or interrupted until my kids get home from school. The solitude turns stale sometimes, though. It's a bit like an avocado, divine one day and then suddenly sad and brown the next. To stem my loneliness and because