

Ohioans among national award finalists for Romance Writers awards

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ThisWeek Contributor

On July 30 in Reno, Nevada, the \$1.41-billion romance industry will honor the best of its best at the Romance Writers of America (RWA) 25th national conference.

The annual awards are two-tiered -- the RITAs going to the best romance fiction published the previous year and the Golden Hearts recognizing the cream of RWA members' as-yet-unpublished romance manuscripts.

Five Ohio authors are among the finalists waiting to discover if a RITA or Golden Heart statue will be part of their personal happily-ever-afters.

"Just being mentioned in the same breath as (*New York Times* bestselling author) Connie Brockway is enough for me," Deborah Simmons recently told *ThisWeek*, when asked about finaling in the RITA's "Best Short Historical Romance" category. "I hope (the award) will help readers discover my books."

Simmons, a rural Ohio author of 23 novels, has been a member of RWA and its local chapter, Central Ohio Fiction Writers, for 15 years. Her 2004 historical romantic suspense from Berkley, *A Lady of Distinction*, is the latest of several books that have brought Simmons to the notice of the RITA judges.

"The only thing better than being a Golden Heart finalist is getting 'The Call' saying someone wants to publish my book," aspiring author Barbara Satow stated. "In a sense, I've already 'won.' The line 'I am/was a 2005 Golden Heart finalist' in a query letter will carry weight with editors and agents. And when I walk around the national conference with my finalist ribbon, people will stop me to ask about my book."

Satow pens traditional Regency romances, witty, G-rated historical novels set between 1795 and the 1820s -- usually in England -- and written in the style of Jane Austin.

Her manuscript, *The Muse*, is one of five she has completed since joining RWA and her Cleveland-area chapter, Northeast Ohio RWA.

"I do have an (acceptance) speech prepared," Satow admitted, "but whether I get to give it is another matter. I'm up against two very fine writers."

Aspiring author Elizabeth Bemis, who is a finalist in the Golden Heart's "Best Contemporary Single Title Romance" category, only has to tweak the acceptance speech she prepared for the 2004 ceremony.

"I wrote out my speech last year when I was nominated in the 'Long Contemporary' category and have actually kept the piece of paper ... in my wallet to remind me of how close my writing is to very big things," she said.

A member of the Cincinnati-area chapter, Ohio Valley RWA, Bemis agrees that being a finalist in the romance industry's top awards brings respect.

"My Golden Heart finals have opened doors at literary agencies and publishers that would never have been opened to me without them," she said.

The finalists credit their membership in RWA, a 9,000-strong professional trade association, with helping them reach this point.

"I don't think my writing would have come nearly as far, nor would I have stuck with it if it weren't for the support of my fellow chapter members and other people I've met as a member of RWA," Bemis said.

Satow commended RWA's "sense of community."

"Joining this organization changed me from a wannabe to a writer who intends to publish one day," she said.

New York Times bestselling author and past RITA winner Jennifer Crusie praised RWA as having "a huge, huge impact on my career. The networking alone has been invaluable; it's how I found my critique partner and my agent." *Bet Me*, her laugh-aloud-funny finalist in the RITA's "Best Contemporary Single Title" category, is now available in paperback from St. Martin's Press.

RWA peers of the RITA and Golden Heart finalists will be cheering them on at the black-tie awards ceremony -- although there will be few actual black ties in evidence, as traditionally more than 90 percent of the 2,000 attendees are female.

Readers who are fans of the RITA finalists will root for their favorites during online chats and on e-mail loops. And, given the fact that romance novels make up almost 50 percent of all mass-market paperback fiction sold, that's quite a few fans.

"You know, there's a reason that romance is the most popular form of fiction," Crusie said. "I get tired of promoting a genre that is so far ahead of the other genres, including the literary genre, in readership ... no form of fiction is universal, but it's clearly reaching and pleasing a lot of people. That's all it's supposed to do, that's all any form of fiction is supposed to do: please and move readers." Simmons pointed out the appeal of romance extends beyond the United States.

"Romance readers are the most supportive readers in the world," she said. "I still receive letters and e-mails about my medieval series -- 10 years after the first book was released. I hear from readers all over the world, including those in England, France, Brazil, and Japan, where my books have been translated and published, even in illustrated editions."

Aspiring authors -- like Bemis, Satow, and Dayton-area writer and Golden Heart finalist Pam Menz Baker, who was unavailable to be interviewed -- hope their manuscripts will someday be published and on book stores' romance shelves.

"When I joined RWA and began reading modern romance novels," Satow said, "I found they had many of the elements of ... other genres -- mystery, suspense, comedy, pathos, new worlds and exciting places, family and social issues -- with the focus on that part of the story that interested me the most -- two people working through their problems to develop a committed relationship that will last 'til death do us part.' To love and be loved is a reality we all hope and strive for. Romance novels take that universal desire and portray the dream come true."

Bemis concurred, mentioning the inspirational aspect of the feel-good novels.

"The romance genre allows writers and readers to experience a story where a woman triumphs in the end without having to abandon her morals or principles and where the inherent good in the universe is rewarded every time."