

Bestselling Author Revisits Her Roots

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ThisWeek Contributor

Buckeye fans of author Susan Elizabeth Phillips have cause for celebration. The czarina of romantic comedy is coming to Columbus with booksignings scheduled on Oct. 11 and 12. “My roots in Columbus go deep,” said Phillips, a regular on literary bestseller rosters from the *New York Times* to the *USA Today* lists. “I love the city and still consider it my home.”

Born in Cincinnati, Phillips was raised in Columbus, attending North High School (now North Education Center). Graduating with a bachelor’s of fine arts degree from Ohio University, the author returned to Columbus to marry, settling down to teach English, speech and drama for six years at Linden-McKinley High School. The first of her two sons was born at the old St. Ann’s Hospital. The family was happily entrenched in Central Ohio until husband Bill’s work at Bell Labs took them to New Jersey. “When we moved away from Columbus, we thought it would only be for two years,” she said.

The long journey from Ohio to her current Chicago suburban home has included a remarkable string of literary milestones for the perennial reader favorite. Phillips, who is a serial winner of the romance genre’s highest award, the RITA®, was inducted into the Romance Writers of America® Hall of Fame in 2001. She holds a Career Achievement Award from *Romantic Times Bookclub*, and her books have won almost as many accolades as fans. Not bad for a woman who says she started writing completely by accident.

“One day, just for fun, my best friend Claire and I decided to write a book together,” Phillips said. “For three weeks as we rode our bikes in the evening, with my toddler in the baby seat behind me, we plotted our story.” Actually writing the book proved more difficult, but the pair eventually worked out a system. When half of the manuscript was complete, they called a Dell Publishing editor, who agreed to look at their unfinished historical romance. Three weeks later, the editor called to make them an offer.

“I never tell this story at writers’ luncheons for fear I’ll have to duck flying French rolls thrown by an angry audience,” Phillips said, only half-kidding. “It sounds so easy, but the market was red hot then, and the publishers were hungry for books. Unfortunately, it’s not so easy now.” In 1983, the book was published as *The Copeland Bride*, under the pseudonym Justine Cole. “I wanted to use [the pen name] Chastity Savage, but Claire wouldn’t let me,” Phillips joked.

When her co-author moved on to a legal career, Phillips wrote a second historical romance, *Risen Glory*, solo and published it in 1984 under her real name. She recently revised and expanded this out-of-print book, which Avon reissued in 2001 as *Just Imagine*. A series of more mainstream, women’s fiction novels followed. “As I wrote these books, I discovered my contemporary ‘voice,’” Phillips explained. And readers began to discover her.

In 1994, Phillips turned conventional romance writing wisdom on its ear by penning a book featuring a sports professional as the hero. *It Had To Be You*, her first romantic comedy and the book that launched her Chicago Stars football team series, was a hit. Readers loved the story in which the heroine, who’s clueless about sports, inherits a football team and finds herself sparring with and falling



for the team's sexist head coach. Phillips' wit shines from the pages with lines such as, "Don't tell me you've got something against wet t-shirt contests. That's the closest most football players get to a cultural event." *It Had To Be You* carried Phillips to her current publisher, Avon, and – in her words – “re-energized my career.”

Seven romantic comedies later, including five additional Chicago Stars books, Phillips is still making readers laugh and critics wax poetic. *Breathing Room*, her 2002 William Morrow hardback (released by Avon in paperback in 2003), features another of the author's signature and ingenious pairings of mismatched lovers – a self-help author facing her own personal crisis and Hollywood's premiere villain who's in need of some rescuing himself. *Publishers Weekly* described *Breathing Room* as “witty, moving, passionate and tender.” *Booklist* praised the novel as “splendid entertainment...flavored with Phillips' clever humor and quick wit,...a pure joy to read.”

Phillips' books deliver such a potent combination of humor and poignancy that addicted readers wish they could clone her to double her creative output. Those looking for a new Phillips' fix will have to wait until Feb. 3, 2004, the release date of *Ain't She Sweet?*, her next romantic comedy. In the interim, fans must content themselves with rereading her backlist, listening to her books on audiotape and chatting on the bulletin board at her Web site (www.susanephillips.com). The site also includes a “Favorite Quotes” area, currently 15 pages long, where readers post lines from her books that made them laugh or sigh.

Phillips is the first to tell you she's not funny in person, although the multitude of aspiring authors who have attended her popular writing workshops would dispute that. Her drama and teaching experience turns her presentations into interactive and often hilarious events. Whether she's leading workshop attendees through creative writing exercises or pitching – tongue-in-cheek – her idea for the perfect Alpha hero name (Sperm Coltrane), Phillips entertains and educates.

While gently teasing certain aspects of the genre, Phillips is a staunch supporter of romantic fiction. “I'm so proud to write in a genre that emphasizes family, community and everything positive about being alive,” she stated. Although literary critics often disdain romance, the books empower women and offer readers a much-needed positive resolution in a time when happy endings can seem few and far between.

Romance novels account for more than half of all paperback fiction sold in the United States. Over 50 million readers – 32 percent of whom live in the Midwest – purchase romances, ranging from historicals and romantic suspense to paranormals and romantic comedies. With so many subgenres to enjoy, fans spend more than \$1.5 billion on romances a year. “I take books with me everywhere I go,” Phillips said. “I love romance and ‘women's fiction/relationship books’ and am a big reader of the genre.”

Readers who share Phillips' appreciation for romance can meet her and other authors – including Lori Foster, Karen Harper, Catherine Mann and Joanne Rock – at Central Ohio Fiction Writers' conference booksigning on Oct. 11 or the Upper Arlington Barnes & Noble booksigning on Oct. 12. Phillips looks forward to visiting her old stomping ground. “I hope to see my Buckeye readers, old friends and North High and Linden-McKinley grads.”

Meet the Author

What: Susan Elizabeth Phillips, author of *Breathing Room*, will appear at two free-to-the-public, multi-author booksignings as part of Central Ohio Fiction Writers' annual conference.

When & Where:

Saturday, Oct. 11, from 3 p.m. – 5 p.m. at the Wyndham Dublin Hotel (600 Metro Place North, Dublin; 614/764-2200)

Sunday, Oct. 12, from 1 p.m. – 3 p.m. at the Upper Arlington Barnes & Noble (3280 Tremont Road, Columbus; 614/459-0920)