

Super Granny

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 07 March 2006 18:00

For a current Virginian, Beverly van Hook knows her Quad Cities. The author was selected by the Midwest Writing Center to be the guest speaker at the organization's Silver Anniversary Awards Banquet – at the Outing Club on Saturday, March 11 – and the decision makes sense.

Although a native West Virginian presently living in Charlottesville, Virginia, van Hook spent more than 20 years as a Quad Citian, having lived in East Moline, Moline, and Rock Island. After spending the better part of two decades here working as a freelance writer, van Hook had articles published in the *Quad-City Times* beginning in 1980 – at which time she also appeared regularly on WQAD-TV as a book reviewer – and even co-founded a publishing company in 1985.

Yet van Hook is best-known for her “Supergranny” mysteries – geared toward young readers – that began with 1985's *The Mystery of the Shrunken Heads* and has continued through *The Villainous Vicar* (the seventh book in the series), selling more than 100,000 copies nationwide.

The books' central figure herself is, to the outside world, a sweet, genial elder citizen known as Mrs. Oglepop. But in actuality, she's Supergranny, a fun-lovin', mystery-solvin', wisecrackin' gal who tools through town in a red Ferrari and is never afraid to speak her mind.

She also lives in a place that seems an *awful* lot like one of the Quad Cities.

Even the first *page* of *Shrunken Heads* makes it feel like a product of the area, when a Cleveland family moves into its new home, in a town that feels all-too-familiar: “Angela is my older sister,” explains the book's youthful narrator, Joshua. “She didn't want to move into the house on 14th Street. It wasn't the *house* she minded, it was the 14th. She wanted to live on a street with a name, not a number.”

And by the time a reader reaches the reference to “the Putno Museum” on page 15, any lingering doubts about the book's locale are completely erased.

They say: Write what you know. And Beverly van Hook did.

After majoring in journalism at Ohio University, van Hook and her husband – newly employed by Deere & Company – arrived in 1963 in East Moline, where the “Supergranny” author's journalism degree led her to Rock Island's Augustana College. “When I first got there [East Moline], I worked for Augustana. They were starting a new publication called *The Augustana Story*” – a literature and poetry collection published several times throughout the year – “and I was the editor.”

During the next 17 years, van Hook – while raising three children – also contributed freelance articles to newspapers in Vermont and West Virginia, and in 1980 emerged as a familiar presence in the Quad Cities community; she was hired as a feature writer for the *Quad-City Times* – “I really did enjoy it,” she says of her employment there – and began delivering on-air book reviews for a program on WQAD-TV. “They had a 5 o'clock local news show that had more

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'feature' material in it," she says, adding, with a laugh, "I told my friends I wanted a part-time job, so I got one where I worked a minute-and-a-half a week."

Yet the author felt an urge to write fiction – specifically mysteries – and an urge to get others excited about *reading* them. "I was interested in trying to do my part to help draw kids into reading," she says, "especially with three children. ... There was a lot of concern that children weren't reading, and I think mysteries are a *great* way to draw kids into reading. I wanted to do my little part to help."

Writing from her home in 1984 – the family had, by the early '80s, moved to Rock Island – van Hook invented the character of Supergranny, which, like much of the author's work, had a basis in reality. "Supergranny herself had been rattlin' around in my head for about 10 years, because when I was a child, I had an aunt who was so much fun but so very *proper*," the 65-year-old van Hook says. "And I always teased her that I'd buy her a red convertible, because I liked the idea of a very proper, elderly woman flippin' around in a red convertible."

The idea for the *Shrunken Heads* plot came from a trip to – you guessed it – the Putnam Museum, which van Hook's children, she says, loved visiting. "Their favorite exhibit at the Putnam Museum was the shrunken heads," she says. "So that inspired the mysteries."

As for the books' locale, van Hook's inspiration didn't rest with a specific town. "It's the whole Quad Cities," she explains. "It's a blend ... and Supergranny still lives in an imaginary place based on the Quad Cities."

By the late summer of 1984, *The Mystery of the Shrunken Heads* was completed, yet writing the book proved less frustrating than finding a company willing to publish it. In the fall of '84, Van Hook's literary agent began shopping *The Mystery of the Shrunken Heads* in New York, and numerous publishers told the author they liked it. Yet no one wanted to take a chance on the project, and as this was still several months before Angela Lansbury and her mystery series *Murder, She Wrote* became a pop-culture phenomenon, van Hook believes a major factor in publishers' reluctance was the age of her central character.

"I think, frankly, there's still a long-standing prejudice among major publishers," she says. "Notice how often you see elderly women ridiculed; it's like they're the one group that you're *allowed* to ridicule." Van Hook adds that the Supergranny series has twice been – and is currently being – optioned for film and television, but no projects are in the immediate offing: "We were real hopeful for a while, but we're still running into them saying, 'Supergranny's too *old*.'"

So after months of disappointment, van Hook, in 1985, did what Supergranny would certainly do: She took the matter into her own hands, co-founding a publishing company specifically *for*

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her series. “It was exciting,” she says of the creation of publishing company Holderby & Bierce, the name for which was derived from two streets van Hook and her husband lived on in their hometowns – Holderby Road in West Virginia and Bierce Avenue in Don’s native Ohio – and from van Hook’s desire to have “a really serious name” for her fledgling company. “I started by subscribing to

Publisher’s Weekly

, which I read like a bible for five years, and then I started talking to people to edit the book, and artists ... people I knew there. And so many people there were eager to try

“The editor,” she continues, “was my copy editor at the *Quad-City Times* at the time, and the artist was Cathy Wayson – a wonderful artist from the Quad Cities – and we’d all just get together and people worked for a percentage. Some of them even

donated

their time. We had the book printed locally, and the first book sold out in 10 months and went into five printings.”

More than 100,000 copies later, the Supergranny series continues to be published by Holderby & Bierce, and continues to inspire young readers, including van Hook’s two six-year-old granddaughters and her grandson, at whose second-grade class the author spoke last Friday. (“It’s kind of a milestone for me,” she happily reveals.) Her success continues to delight and surprise the author. “I guess when I started it,” she marvels, “I didn’t realize how amazing it would be.”

And Van Hook’s mystery-solving granny currently has mystery-solving company – Liza and Dutch Randolph, the married sleuths featured in van Hook’s mystery novels *Fiction, Fact, & Murder* and *Juliet’s Ghost*.

Both books – geared toward adult readers – share the Supergranny series’ personal inspiration; *Juliet’s Ghost*, van Hook says, is “set almost entirely in the Quad Cities,” and the heroine, Liza, writes novels featuring a character named ... Super *gramps*

“That’s a coincidence, isn’t it?” van Hook says with a laugh, before admitting, “I suppose she’s [Liza’s] somewhat like me. She has three children and has been married a long time to a great guy.”

So why, after such Supergranny success, begin writing a mystery series for adults?

“I think I wanted to write longer sentences.”

Beverly van Hook will speak at the Midwest Writing Center’s Silver Anniversary Awards Banquet at The Outing Club on Saturday, March 11. For more information on the Midwest

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Writing Center, call (563)324-1410.